



Stuart Millard

Euro Disney's Grand Opening

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For a certain generation, there was no more exotic promised land than that of the theme park. Alton Towers, The American Adventure, and of course the king, Disneyland/Disney World. The mouse parks were so embedded in popular culture that a series of ads with Super Bowl winners **made a meme** of celebrating a victory by taking yourself there as a reward, highlighting this as the ultimate goal we should all be reaching for; the greatest treat there is. But us Brits could not go to Disneyland, unless in one of those families who took their kids out of school for a fortnight to Florida, returning with stories of seeing *Gremlins 3* and getting off with a cheerleader (“Guess what ‘fanny’ means out there?!”). So far away, they might as well be on the moon, these magical realms inhabited our national consciousness as tantalising, perennial sights on television; in video packages about the United States, or as playground to sick and grieving children who’d been taken there by Noel Edmonds.

But then came Euro Disney, situated in Paris, rendering Mickey and pals reachable with a quick jaunt on the ferry – and in a couple of years time, on the Chunnel – putting it as close as the hypermarkets yer dad and his mates bought their cheap booze and fags from. Before the internet mushed our cultures together, as a country, we were fatally enamoured with the loud noises and unimaginable scale of America, in the global equivalent of getting all nervous around a foreign exchange student who smoked and wore a leather jacket. Exciting, bold, brash; this was the land where cool things came from, everyone either riding a skateboard or a horse, saying “have a nice day!” and living

off three square meals of the kind of enormous burgers breakfast television's 'Stateside' correspondents scoffed while turning a baseball cap sideways.



Both this crush and the excitement of a nearby Disneyland united in a live, two-hour television special, airing at 9pm on the night of April 11th 1992, counting down to midnight in Paris, when the ribbon would be cut and the gates would officially open. Broadcasting simultaneously in five languages all across Europe – and later in the day for American viewers – it's literally just an enormous advert; perhaps the biggest, most sycophantic advert to ever air. Hosts for ITV's version, and as such, ambassadors for the United Kingdom, are Pat Sharp and Matthew Kelly, each in their most powerful incarnations; Sharp's blonde mullet coiffed at the top, shiny and luxurious at the back, and Kelly, bearded, Edmonds-haired, and with the wardrobe selections of a clown. Stood in front of the Houses of Parliament, the pair jump in a taxi to *"the kingdom where magical dreams really do come true."*

The script's comprised solely of this fawning language, where Uncle Walt's not just the greatest storyteller, but the only man to have ever used his imagination, and there is no magic and wonder like that of Disney. On these points, everyone in the world agrees, unless there's something wrong with them! Ironically, the dawn of the Euro park occurs right when the company are first beginning to emerge out of the 'manky Disney' era **as seen in** the Children's Royal Varieties. In early '92, it was slim pickings for Disney adults, *Aladdin* yet to be released, and recent breakout *Beauty and the Beast* still too fresh to have fully woven itself into the canon, leaving the brand reliant on imagery and characters from decades-old films; your *Bambis* and *Dumbos* and *Alice in Wonderlands* – films you still couldn't buy on VHS – resulting in endless footage of wobbling Goofy and Tweedle-Dee costumes under orchestral renditions of *When You Wish Upon a Star*.



"Disney and children go together like rhubarb and custard" squawks Pat, introducing the seven little blighters with shite lives specially hand-picked by Bernardo's to accompany him and Matthew to Paris. Once there, one of them can be heard loudly chattering away through the intro. This is Carlton's raw satellite feed, with a time-code in the corner and black-screened during ad-breaks, and given our presenters, there's a whimsical tone, links heavy on puns and office joker bants. *"Here's trouble!"* says Pat, spotting Matthew at the airport. Consequently, it's a strange collision of low-rent light-ent and A-List American production values, opening on footage of all the stars on the red carpet; JCVD, Michael J. Fox, Eddie Murphy, and then a parade down Main Street. It's the Wacky Races we all dreamed of, old fashioned cars with George Lucas sat on the back waving under a rain of ticker tape, Donald Duck riding shotgun. Eddie Murphy's vehicle is trailed by a group of dancing pumpkins, while Rosanna Arquette's long-haired boyfriend has a camcorder glued to his eye, seemingly unfazed by the Gummi Bear in the passenger seat.

Matthew and Pat have a clear system – whichever one's talking, the other one's mugging – and the way they're dressed, Pat with his tresses and lovely gold bracelet, about six inches in height between them, they resemble a newlywed husband and wife on their dream honeymoon. Links have a hurried quality, squeezing in gags, plus endless facts and figures – *"Sleeping Beauty's castle can be seen for over two miles!"* – before scheduled events begin, regardless if everyone's finished talking. Matthew's cut off by a fanfare signalling the castle's lighting ceremony, mostly in un-subtitled French, where an enormous choir of children shout-sing *When You Wish Upon a Star*, which feels like watching someone else's home video of their kid's nativity. At the exciting climax, Matthew remarks *"you don't get fireworks like that in a ten bob box, and more's the pity!"*



Throughout the night we're treated to live musical performances. With enough hair for three women, Cher does *The Shoop Shoop Song* in leather chaps with a V of jeans just visible through a pussy window, before bumping arses with Mickey. Gloria Estefan rises out of a smokey trapdoor like Gangrel. Tina Turner, aged 52, is introduced by Pat as “a groovy granny,” and accompanied on sax by him with the muscles from *Lost Boys* – though for Disney, the titties are covered. The Temptations tag-team with the Four Tops, and Pat introduces Jose Carreras in the florid manner of a man ordering croissants on a first date. Big Ang Lansbury does the theme from *Beast*, and though she's clearly miming to the soundtrack CD, who cares; it's Lansbury!

In one of many videos, Walt's nephew Roy Disney stands by a road sign in France, informing us this is where the roots of his family reside. He has the exact voice of stand-up comedian **Steven Wright**. I'm not sure on their maths, narration saying Walt's family lived in France 900 years ago, and “a few centuries later” he served there in WW2 as an ambulance driver. Also, is it a *bit* weird and lazy that Walt just gave the company his own surname? Imagine if I switched things up, and 50 years from now, there's a beloved animation company with dozens of classic films and a big roster of characters all under the branding of Millard. Wooo, I'm goin' to Millardland! And you'll be there too, because you're a self-branded Millard Adult.



Pat Sharp, in a swivel chair with his legs open at 180 degrees, discussing legends, describes Matthew as a *“leg end.”* Unbelievable banter with these lads! Matthew's own body language is so odd, fidgeting and bucking his back when he speaks, like a child reading aloud in assembly. He puts about a hundred syllables in the phrase *“mind blowing”* while stood outside Frontierland in a purple jacket and flowered shirt like the Joker. The Frontierland video demonstrates how Disney sees its own country, where the two genders are cowboy and saucy bordello lady; the latter arm in arm with tourist dads in early 90's ski jackets. There's energetic can-can dancing, one of those theme park shoot-outs where blokes throw camp haymakers and fall off balconies into horse troughs, a paddle boat and spooky mansion, and a train going through a mining town; a ride Matthew assures us is *“double fab with a side-order of brilliant!”*

Vox pops from staff have vast hostage video energy, each desperate to see their families for the first time in six months, and begging they bring tea bags and Kit-Kats to the grand opening. A woman greets loved ones back home, *“especially my mother who's just come out of hospital, I hope she's feeling very much better.”* Are these messages from greeters at a theme park, or the first astronauts on Mars? “Hi son, I know this transmission will take years to reach you, so you're now older than me...” Incidentally, a month after opening, a full quarter of Euro Disney's employees, numbering 3,000, would resign, citing poor working conditions.



Life at a Disney park seems to be one parade after the other, and each VT quickly degenerates into more marching; more brass bands; old timey vehicles and old timey clothes, lack of contemporary output leaving them beholden to the past, as barbershop quartets perform jazzy renditions of cartoon standards. Everywhere you turn, the sound of that wah-wah trumpet with the cup over the end, and everyone waving; always waving. The boys spit more facts about how many tonnes of laundry the park will wash or swimming pools' worth of soda they'll sell, cueing in more exhausting medleys; high-kicking pirates in Adventure Land and Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show – horseys and cap-guns, and nobody with their william tucked between their legs. The most startling thing is how *cheap* it all looks, costumes straight out of the dressing up box, though in Pat's opinion it's "*fantastic, awesome, and definitely bodacious!*"

For telly nerds like me who've never known affection, the raw feed brings extra bonuses, hearing producers inform Matthew his mic's dying and they must "*go with the hand mic!*" Exhilarating. C-3PO speaks French to Jules Verne; Michael Jackson's heavily-promoted *Captain E-O* segment finally airs, in 45 whole seconds of clips. With an anticlimactic eight seconds remaining, we watch the countdown clock take us home, to more fireworks and marching bands, Chip and Dale dancing, and Captain Hook with his face frozen in a well-pissed-off expression, like he'd rather be at home. Eisner dedicates the park under a brass band's *Zippedy Doo-Dah*, reminding everyone of a film they made that was so racist, they can never show it again, then nearly takes another executive's eye out with the giant *Exorcist 3* shears that cut the ribbon – "my-oh-my, I got blinded today!" As he declares the park open, in French but no accent, a historical moment's ruined by his voice pubescently cracking during the pivotal words "*Euro Disney*." Mickey emerges from a doorway which bleeds blinding white light, like the aliens at the end of *Close Encounters*, beckoning us inside, rather fittingly, as the whole show's been about forcibly dragging everyone into an overlit fantasy realm. "*A world achievement from the whole world*," says Pat, waving goodbye. Within two years, the park would accrue \$3b of debt.



For comparison's sake, I also sat through the American version, taken from its CBS airing, in which hosting duties pass from our goofs to Hollywood power couple, Don Johnson and Melanie Griffith. Polished and cool, there's far less mucking about, with Don super laid back, and Griffith suffering visible fanny-quake at the sight of him speaking French. It sets your heart racing just knowing, at that very moment, Sharp and Kelly were sat mere yards away, reading from an almost identical autocue. This one throws in a roving reporter with CBS sports anchor Pat O'Brien, though all the other footage and script is the same, albeit with the puns taken out. When Don discusses the gold rush, it's without Matthew's asides about "*them thar hills!*" and whatnot, and one wonders whether Matthew added them in, or the Americans took them out. Are they afraid of fun or summin'k? Also, the CBS version is sponsored by McDonalds and JCPenny, because of course it is.



This is a great exercise in interpretation, with Griffith's sedate reading of facts and figures Matthew Kelly found cause to gurn over. While Pat's making Biggles flying goggles with his hands, this pair joke about Lady from *Lady and the Tramp* becoming a redhead when she moved to Hollywood. Don will describe the Gypsy Kings as “*talk about music from the soul.*” “*Straight from the heart,*” agrees Melanie, and perhaps their status affords a less detached and wowed presenting style than Pat and Matt; more of a mutual appreciation society from one celebrity to another. “*In the biz, they call that a great hook,*” says Don following a performance by “*some old pals of mine,*” Gloria Estefan and the Miami Sound Machine. In a real *Rashomon* moment, if we peek over Pat O'Brien's shoulder, who's that colourfully dressed bearded giant? Why, it's our Matthew! “*Uniting the world in the name of Disney,*” says O'Brien. We also get a look at all the other film crews, to learn what the European equivalents of Pat Sharp look like. No surprise, it's a gorgeous Italian lady. The EU are laughing at us!



Though us Brits didn't have that extra sexual tension, and when Don says *"of course as we grow up, we learn that life doesn't always guarantee a Prince Charming or a happy ending,"* Melanie gives him a knowing look most men will never be lucky enough to receive – *"well..."* One person who definitely preferred the CBS version was Tina Turner, elevated in her intro from groovy granny to *"the hardest working woman in rock and roll."* But if there's one thing that unites our nations, and indeed the entire world, it's that we love the magic and wonder of Disney, don't we? DON'T WE?! Matthew Kelly wouldn't lie to me. Certainly, in being repeatedly assured that you fucking love Disney for two solid hours, there's a risk of giving in and letting yourself get swept up in it, like those videos of megachurch faith healers sending members of the congregation flying with the barest touch. Here comes Pat, blonde mullet swaying as he moves down the line, parishioners going down like Norman Wisdom on a banana skin. But when he gets to you, are you just gonna stand there, or will you be thrashing around on the floor, eyes rolled back, speaking in tongues to the tune of *Wish Upon a Star*?

17 7

Ciaran Colley

3d

I would happily go to Millardland. And get my photo taken with all the orphans/convicts you pay to strut around in giant costumes resembling Davidson, Large, Arthur Mullard and, of course, Edmonds.

3



Alison Eales

3d

Queuing for an hour and a half to go on Well Bad Nob Ache Mountain

6



Load replies

Steven Hunter3d

Taking my kids here in August, would prefer a Pat Sharp meet and greet to a Mickey one (though I found out Pat lives in Bushey which is just up the road!)

1

Stuart Millard3d

Hope they've got some of Matthew's clothes on display like Planet Hollywood

2

Alison Eales3d

I lost it at 'seven little blighters with shite lives specially hand-picked by Bernardos'

2

Stuart Millard3d

"Hi-ho, hi-ho, it's off to a poorly-ventilated home rife with black mould we go!"

1

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